

Service Quality in the School of Management, USM: Perceptions of Students in Pursuit of MBA

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Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

Alhamdulillah

“If you are honest, sincere, persistent, consistent, patient, and work hard you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. And anything worth doing is worth doing to the best of your capabilities.”

To my family, for their love and support.

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ABSTRACT

In many countries and many cultures, the issue of service quality is firmly on the agenda for higher education institutions. Universities and faculties strive to provide high quality services because they need to compete for their students. Measuring the quality of their services is therefore an important task. Furthermore, to be successful, they must focus on their students' satisfaction. Past researches have pointed out that student satisfaction may be used as an effective instrument for raising the quality of an educational program. This research highlighted five dimensions of perceived service quality in higher education namely program quality, life quality, lecturing faculty quality, academics facilities quality and outcome quality. The dimensions are then examined to see their relationship with student satisfaction. In addition to that, the research included student engagement to understand whether this particular variable moderates the relationship between the dimensions of perceived service quality and student satisfaction. Research was done on USM MBA students. Results of this study indicated that perceived program quality and perceived outcome quality of service were the most important in explaining the overall student satisfaction. The study also confirmed the importance of student engagement in moderating the relationship between the dimensions of perceived service quality and students satisfaction.

ABSTRAK

Kini, tidak dapat disangkal lagi isu kualiti perkhidmatan merupakan agenda utama bagi institusi-institusi pelajaran tinggi di serata negara. Dalam usaha untuk menjadi yang terbaik, universiti dan pihak fakulti berusaha keras menyediakan perkhidmatan yang berkualiti untuk pelajar-pelajar. Adalah penting untuk pihak bertanggungjawab ini mengukur tahap kualiti perkhidmatan yang mereka sediakan. Malah, untuk merealisasikan matlamat mereka itu, adalah perlu fokus diberikan kepada tahap kepuasan pelajar-pelajar. Ini sejajar dengan kesimpulan yang telah diputuskan oleh kajian-kajian yang terdahulu di mana kepuasan pelajar boleh digunakan sebagai asas panduan kepada usaha menaiktaraf kualiti sesebuah program pendidikan. Kajian ini telah menyenaraikan lima dimensi tanggapan kualiti perkhidmatan iaitu kualiti program, kualiti hidup, kualiti pensyarah, kualiti kemudahan, dan kualiti kesudahan sesuatu perkhidmatan. Dimensi-dimensi berikut kemudiannya telah dikaji bagi melihat hubungkait dengan kepuasan pelajar. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga telah menyelidik samada penglibatan pelajar boleh memberi kesan kepada hubungkait tanggapan dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan dan kepuasan pelajar. Penyelidikan telah dijalankan ke atas pelajar-pelajar MBA USM. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kualiti program dan kualiti kesudahan perkhidmatan adalah yang terpenting dalam menghuraikan kepuasan pelajar. Para pelajar juga telah mengesahkan bahawa penglibatan pelajar dalam proses pembelajaran adalah penting bagi memberi kesan terhadap hubungkait di antara dimensi kualiti perkhidmatan dan kepuasan pelajar.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Once called the “maddeningly rare commodity”, services have appeared to be the focus of the rising tide of consumer expectation and discontent. For years, problems between those being served and those serving kept on piling as people become more educated and more demanding. The lines between these two parties can never be drawn clearly as aggression and hatred became a part of the customer-service provider relationship. The perception of this relationship seems to have reached a severe condition where customers get overly critical over the services they receive. Their immediate dissatisfaction is on the standard of the quality of the service they get. Why has quality service become an important issue? One significant reason is that the world is now focused on service economy. This significant change in the attitude of service oriented organizations has brought about a more positive culture with regard to quality service. It is rather assuring to see service providers acting and playing their roles differently towards promoting quality service to customers today.

1.1 Quality in Higher Education

The focus of quality in service in this research is narrowed down to one aspect particularly service in higher education. Being an important agent, higher education service providers are now looked at as having the edge in improving its services. Ever since higher education providers throughout the globe were urged to operate more commercially, quality has been identified as the core ingredient to success, and as the evolution of dynamic competition continues, students as clients must be satisfied.

We have to face the fact that quality is no longer just for manufacturers. In recent years, providing quality higher education in developing countries has become a great challenge and extremely significant to society and government. As higher education providers like the universities face internationalization, they must now compete with the standards set by other educational institutions of the world. This exposure has stimulated a demand for better information and transparency about quality in order to attract and retain students, both national and international students.

Arguments that quality could not be measured but could be recognized by academics when and where it existed were common. There are many different understandings of the term “quality”, often reflecting the interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education. Thus, we can say that quality is multidimensional and often a subjective concept. In order to provide quality, higher education providers must first understand what their students need. To do that, they must understand the quality attributes embraced by these students because quality is perceived differently. One might see quality education as in the teaching syllabus, the caliber of the lecturer and the facilities provided. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) pointed out that in order to measure quality, characteristics of the quality need to be identified. Additionally, Cheng and Tam (1997) emphasized on the importance of defining characteristics of quality for the measurement of the education process.

1.2 The Higher Education State of Affairs in Malaysia

Higher education in Malaysia is expanding at a very significant rate. Malaysia’s higher education is built around public and private institutions of higher learning.

In Malaysia, under the establishment of the National Accreditation Board in 1997, policies on standards and criteria for quality assurance, accreditation of programs and recommendations was developed for private higher educational institutions (PHEIs). In 2002, the government decided that public universities must also be subjected to quality assurance and ordered the establishment of the Quality Assurance Division (QAD). The realization was due to the global, regional and local forces for quality assurance and also due to the increased concern on quality of graduates of professional courses by professional bodies (Shahabudin, 2005).

In early 2004, a new higher education ministry was set up and the country saw significant changes with the establishment of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and a Malaysian Qualifications Framework that strengthened and enhanced the higher education system. The government together with QAD and professional bodies, worked together to develop various guidelines on general standards and criteria, post graduate, and distance learning, procedures and codes of practices. The QAD for public universities was established to promote public confidence of the quality audit system and standards and is very much involved in developing the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance, program standards of many disciplines, post graduate standards, procedures, and provide reports of benchmarking outcomes, good practices, training and the National Qualifications Framework. All these are prescribed within the "type of program, its objective and outcomes; quality of curriculum and assessments; academic and support staff; facilities and resources; and quality management systems" (Mohd Fahmi, 2006, p 5). Mohd Fahmi's paper provided an overview of Malaysia's experience in the development of quality assurance in higher education and detailed the introduction of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework.

Malaysia invested a lot of money on education. In September 2002, for ensuring quality, the government allocated RM30 million to finance education programs and to develop the infrastructures. Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were designated as research universities and more resources were channeled to improving research and development capacity (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2004). Education has always been the main agenda for the economic growth, knowledge and harmonious community. Said (2002), therefore, has claimed that strategies have been laid down to enable Malaysian students to face global challenges and he identified accessibility, capability, and quality as important keywords in developing those strategies. These keywords are vital in charting the course of Malaysia's education system. Accessibility means that more students including those academically weak but have technical skill, will have the opportunity to pursue higher education. Meanwhile, capability indicated that institutions of higher education should increase the enrolment of postgraduate students so that more highly educated, capable, skilled workforce can be accomplished and research activity among universities can be increased.

Finally, Said (2002) highlighted that Malaysia requires a quality education system if the country is to realize the goal of being a centre for education excellence. Thus, designing relevant curricula of international standard is noteworthy.

1.3 Background

Education for all is not the same thing as quality education for all. Increasingly, students in developing countries including Malaysia realize that the pursuit of education for all should include the pursuit of excellence. In Malaysia there are seventeen local public universities, one international university, eleven private universities and over 500 Public Higher Educational

Institutions (PHEIs) providing undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Competing against one another in attracting and retaining customers, these institutions “would be well advised to conduct their own research prior to implementation of service programs – else, they could never hope to match service expectations to service deliveries”. (Joseph, Yakhou & Stone, 2005, pp. 67)

Today, higher education is more accessible to a wider clientele who have the choice of going to public universities or to private institutions. “It is a welcoming outcome that the private organizations are really competing well with and even well ahead of government organizations in delivering services and other related outputs. Privatization can be considered to be the right move globally and particularly in Malaysia.” (Sivanand & Nagalingam, 2005, pp. 14) In response to this, public universities should be cautious and should have an appropriate quality control mechanism to keep standards up.

There is no one right way to make quality visible and quantitative. Universities have to identify the qualities that their customers (i.e. students) recognize to be essential for high quality education. In an attempt to define quality and then promote its enhancement, as recipients of higher education, students’ perception of quality were of interest.

A measure of service quality previously may have analyzed the summed overall and not the scales of dimensions. Significant information is lost when summed responses were used, as researchers have no way of identifying which attributes of service contributed to the importance of the research.

Hence, a way to deal with the problem above is by determining the fundamental perceptual dimensions measured by the scales raised in this research. The dimensions of perceived service quality is an important issue since it permits researchers to explore the

relationships between each dimension and construct such as “satisfaction”. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction of students is more than a reaction to the actual performance quality of a service. Students are influenced prior to expectations regarding the level of quality (Hom, 2002). As a follow through, it helps to recognize the potential effects of student satisfaction.

Satisfying students to retain them is important for any education universities. It might be argued that dissatisfied students may cut back on the number of courses or drop out of university completely. Statistics indicate that more than “40% of all college entrants leave higher education without earning a degree, 75% of these students drop out in the first two years of college, and a more recent statistics indicated that 46.2% of the freshmen do not graduate from college” (Kara & DeShields, 2004, pp. 1). Based on the numbers, we can see how important for universities administrator and researchers to focus their attentions on service qualities that give rise to student satisfaction for a better chance to compete.

1.4 Problem Statement

In the area of Malaysian higher education, the concept of what constitutes quality has not been thoroughly addressed. Education may be unique in the sense that is difficult for the students to access the quality and relevance of the service. There is a prevailing belief that higher education has entered a new environment in which quality plays an increasingly important role (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1997).

Notably, in services, the focus has been very much on satisfying customers. The same concept applies to education as students often need to actively participate in the production of the service and such participation needs to be encouraged and guided. As such, it is important to find what factors give rise to student satisfaction (Lagrosen et. al., 2004).

Much concern was being expressed by students about the service quality of the School of Management, USM. In the period of 2005-2007, personal observation saw the transfer of a number of MBA international and local students to other universities. From information gathered during informal interviews and discussions with these students, it has been acknowledged that they moved because they experienced a relatively dissatisfactory level of education. They were uninspired with the quality of learning (i.e. inflexible curriculum) and the quality of social/emotional support systems (i.e. unhelpful support staff). Other than that, there was also dissatisfaction among those who stayed and continued their studies here. They complain similar issues as well as teaching quality and heavy workload issues. These so called service dimension issues affected their learning experience and satisfaction to continue pursuing MBA with the School of Management, USM.

Based on that personal observation, it is clear that challenges exist in the areas of managing service quality and satisfy students. The School of Management, USM having a wide range of distinct offerings and options for a potentially unique experience for students should fully utilize these advantages to satisfy students. Student's satisfaction on a particular service provided will eventually affect their behavior. The information to this effect is generally spread by word-of-mouth. As such, student satisfaction can affect future usage patterns of service (Hom, 2002). Student satisfaction may have to be used as an effective instrument for raising the quality of a program of study.

With reference to the above mentioned problem, undeniably there is a link between dimensions of service quality and student satisfaction. Russell (2005) stated that there is a theory that links consumer satisfaction with perceived quality. It was claimed that if perceived quality was higher, students' satisfaction is higher. Therefore, this research will try to uncover the

dimensions of service quality that students perceive as important in their educational experience and also, to confirm the relationship between dimensions of quality with student satisfaction. This research hopes to give the School of Management, USM the opportunity to understand the dimensions of service quality perceived as important by students and be able to use this information to assure student satisfaction. It is significant for all to see the relationship between service quality dimensions and student satisfaction.

1.5 Research Objectives

From the literature review, most of the research for service quality in the higher education mainly explored the perceptions of different dimensions of service quality in higher education in general and has not been specifically targeting the individual program or education unit. As a result, this research is carried out with the main objectives of identifying dimensions of service quality as perceived by the MBA students in the School of Management, USM and the relationship these dimensions have on their satisfaction. This research specifically aims:

1. To explore the dimensions perceived by students as quality in their MBA study with the School of Management, USM.
2. To determine whether all five perceived dimensions of the service quality are equally important elements to the students in providing them satisfaction.
3. To examine whether MBA student satisfaction is related to the perceived service quality.
4. To examine whether student's engagement moderates the relationship between perceived service quality dimensions with the MBA student's satisfaction.

1.6 Research Questions

This research explores the model of service quality applied to identify factors that determine the quality of higher education as perceived by the students of School of Management, USM. As the school strives to maintain their reputation and establish a brand name for a highly respected higher education provider, identifying and understanding “what does quality education mean to students” is critical. This leads to the following main research questions.

1. What are the factors perceived by students as quality in their MBA study with the School of Management, USM?
2. Are all the five dimensions of service quality perceived as equally important by the students in providing them satisfaction?
3. Are MBA students’ satisfaction influenced by their perceived service quality?
4. Does students’ engagement moderate the relationship between service quality dimensions and satisfaction of MBA students?

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research serves as a tool in giving students an equal opportunity to provide general feedback on their perception of quality in their learning experience. Student feedback will be able to provide the School of Management with comparative information that can be used to assist them in the identification of strengths and weaknesses of the service quality provided, as perceived by the students. Student’s overall perception and evaluation of quality service help to describe a variety of educational activities such as teaching methodology, lecturer-student interaction, staff-student interaction, educational facilities, and contacts with administration. Moreover, the School of Management will also be able to identify gaps between students’ perceptions of education and

that of educators. This is significant to the educators since they often have a misconception of students' attitudes because of the subjective manner in which students' comments are received.

Last but not least, the assessments can be used as a strategic tool for the marketing of the school's programs. Perhaps then the School of Management would have the opportunity to fulfill needs and desires of students, giving the school a competitive advantage in the market.

1.8 Definitions of Key Terms

1.8.1 *Higher Education*

How higher education is defined offers an important insight into why a university must develop a well-structured system and an advanced curriculum. Higher education differs from other services as it is a professional service characterized by a high degree of interpersonal contacts, complexity, divergence, and customizations (Zailani et al, 2006). Said (2002) defined higher education as the "systems which incorporate post- secondary education, namely colleges and universities."

1.8.2 *Quality*

Quality is a concept that is traditionally applied to the manufacturing and production field. The concept of quality has many different interpretations. Among them are: quality as excellence, quality as "zero errors", quality as "fitness for purpose", quality as transformation, quality as threshold, quality as value for money and quality as enhancement or improvement. Harvey and Knight (1996) defined:

- i. *Quality as excellence*: The idea of exceptionally high standards. Higher education providers such as universities hold its goal to be the best in the industry.

ii. *Quality as consistency*: The idea of “zero errors/defects” and getting things right first time.

It is not always applicable to higher education as students are not expected to be identical in which product specifications can be established in detail. In addition, students are not applicable to standardized measurements that can show conformity.

iii. *Quality as fitness for purpose*: The idea of meeting stated purpose, needs, requirements, or desires.

iv. *Quality as transformation*: The idea of an ongoing process for empowerment and enhancement towards satisfaction. Basically if the university is able to provide quality education, the more it achieves the goal of empowering students with specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes which enable them to live and work in the knowledge society.

v. *Quality as threshold*: setting certain norms and criteria. When a university is able to organize program and a faculty that reaches a certain norms and criteria, the university is deemed to be of quality.

vi. *Quality as value for money*: The notion of accountability. Public services, including education are expected to be accountable to the stakeholders.

vii. *Quality as enhancement or improvement*: The idea emphasizes continuous improvement and suggests achieving quality. At this juncture, focus is centered on the academic philosophy and academics know what quality is at any point in time.

1.8.3 *Service Quality*

Only the customers can judge the quality of a service. Thus, service quality is the “conformance of the service to customer specifications and expectations” (Ivancevich, et al., 1997, p. 455).

Service quality is the customer’s overall impression of the relative superiority of an

organization's services, whereas satisfaction derives from individual service transactions and the overall service encounters (Johnston, 1995).

1.8.4 *Perceived Service Quality*

Parasuraman et. al. (1988) defined perceived service quality as customer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority and, described selected tangible items in the environment and non-tangible relationship between for example university lecturers and students. A student's perception on all aspects of their education experiences are widely canvassed and regarded as essential to effective monitoring of quality in universities (Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor, 2003).

1.8.5 *Student Engagement*

Student engagement is defined as the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities and the extent to which the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success (Kuh, 2003).

1.8.6 *Student Satisfaction*

Student satisfaction is a transactional relationship that is satisfying to customers under the marketing definition. It is the "extent to which a product's perceived performance matches a customer's expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996, p. 10)".

1.9 *Organization of Remaining Chapters*

The following chapters shall cover the literature review of past academic research of both empirical and conceptual researches of similar scope of study. The emphasis of the literature

review would be on the importance of service quality in the higher education that was previously identified and determined by the earlier researchers. This would then lead to the introduction of the theoretical framework and generation of hypotheses for this study. The following chapter which is chapter three will discuss on the research methodology which includes the research design, introduction to the variables and its measurements, the sample that is going to be taken, questionnaire design, data collection method and data analysis.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This section discusses the various works done by previous researchers on the subject of quality of higher education. The theoretical framework and the research hypotheses are presented later at the end of the chapter.

2.1 Review of Literature

2.1.1 *Quality in Higher Education*

“Quality in education is what makes learning a pleasure and a joy” (Tribus, 1995, p. 4). The concept of quality has now played a vital role in high education environment. Higher education has now entered the superior service environment where quality plays an increasingly important role.

Defining quality in higher education has proved to be a demanding task as education quality is somewhat unclear and controversial. From one perspective, education quality can be seen as a group of service elements that include input, output and process of the education system that is completely responsible in satisfying internal and external party expectations. Internal parties include students and front line staff of the education provider while external parties are the employers, government bodies, institutional management, prospective students and professional bodies (Becket & Brookes, 2005).

The relationship between quality and cost effectiveness has created new rush to the analysis of quality in higher education. So do other reasons that highlight "quality matters" (Telford & Masson, 2005). In defining those reasons, the two authors stressed that quality in higher education is stakeholder relative- "an individual who has an effect on the process or is affected by it" (Telford & Masson, 2005, p. 108). Their research concluded that the majority of the reasons tied to quality are those associated with what the courses are designed to achieve, the syllabus delivery manner, student-lecturer commitment and importance of library and classroom experience.

The revolution of quality in higher education saw the introduction of a standard known as ISO 9004-2. The standard was issued for the education industry in 1992 by the Organization for Standardization (ISO) (Zailani et al, 2006). Since the issuance of the standard, the higher education industry saw commitment taken by UNESCO to quality in all forms, levels and types of education and learning. Its mandate in education makes it uniquely suited to assist the development of an approach to define specific context-bound priorities and strategies to improve quality. (The UNESCO Quality Education Position Paper by Vinayagum Chinapah)

As published in the paper, UNESCO's approach to quality education requires (1) healthy, well-nourished and motivated students; (2) well-trained teachers and active learning techniques; (3) adequate facilities and learning materials; (4) a relevant curriculum that can be taught and learned in a local language and builds upon the knowledge and experience of the teachers and learners; (5) an environment that not only encourages learning but is welcoming, gender-sensitive, healthy and safe; (6) a clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; (7) participatory governance and management; and (8) respect for and engagement with local communities and cultures.

2.1.2 *Perceived Quality in Higher Education*

Over the years, researchers highlighted many dimensions of quality in education. In a study conducted by Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003), four themes emerged in relation to what students perceived quality education to be. The four themes are quality of lecturer, student engagement with learning, social/emotional support systems, and resources of library and IT. In quality of lecturer, students appreciated lecturers who knew their subject, organized and were interesting to listen to. Students also appreciated lecturers who were flexible and sensitive to their need for success.

In addition to that, they valued lecturers who were easy to be with and helped them to learn. As for student engagement with learning, students valued a curriculum that was related to their worlds but help broadened their horizons. Social/emotional support systems mean that students found support from university support systems, their peers and families. They wanted a support system that gave positive environment that valued learning. Finally, students were found to be wanting for resources of library and IT that are readily available in their universities. The study initially presented a research done by Depoy and Gitlin (1994) and was centered towards the question "What does quality education mean to you?"

The changing contexts present developed the needs to revisit the concept of quality. Tsui (2002) stressed that the focus of quality should be "what students have learnt -what they know, what they can do and what their attitudes are - as a result of their interactions with their teachers, departments and higher education institutions ... quality must be about scholarship and learning" (Tsui, 2002, pp. 3).

Debatably, many of the factors contributing to high quality education are related to particular teaching and learning styles. In 2002, Lammers and Murphy who studied the delivery

of session in a range of academic disciplines in a US university, found that effective and quality education involved the appropriate mixture of 'physical factors' such as the course characteristics, classroom arrangement and 'instructor factors' such as enthusiasm, expertise and teaching style. Simply, students of higher education institution like university, value lecturers who are encouraging, constructive, and positive and able to transmit interest for their subject.

In 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) addressed five areas of practice that is important to student learning. There are the level of academic challenge, amount of active and collaborative learning, student interactions with faculty members, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment. A study on American Indian college students by Hoover and Jacobs (1992), found that students perception towards quality education was based on the institution's preparation, quality of course instruction, personal opinion towards attending university and study skill abilities.

In a study done by Tubutiene (2005), the author stated that the quality of university education was related to the educational mission of academic community. It was found that, traditional attitude of academic community revealed 'quality' as comprehension of highest level since it encouraged striving for perfection. Quality was to serve the purpose of raising academic objectives and realization of processes and results. Quality, as transformation of a student, revealed processes that enabled emancipation of academic community and individuals. Also mentioned was the multi-dimensional quality of education that was revealed by Cheng and Tam (1997). The authors stated that quality assessment of education was determined by the prevailing educational pattern. For example, if education is understood as passing the knowledge and significant cultural values, the role of educator as the main provider of knowledge and values is

then overestimated. Moving on, quality is to be approached as efficiency of education and is assessed as standard of achieved goals.

Cheng and Tam (1997) also revealed that the quality of education is a presumption of special social importance. They mentioned Barnett (1992), Rinehart (1993) Green (1994) and Moorley (2003) emphasized that quality concept in academic community depended on philosophical view on education. Education is a very complicated high-contact service that required extreme utilization of competent and effective personnel at all levels of organization. The perception of academic access, quality, integrity, accessible faculty, and pleasant staff were important to students. Student expectations of performance and preparation for a meaningful and promising career were also important.

Mustafa and Chiang (2006) listed four main dimensions describing the quality of education: teacher abilities, teacher attitudes, course load, and course materials. They stated that while a university's national and international reputation is based on faculty research, its domestic reputation is built on the reaching undergraduates. In addition to that, Mustafa and Chiang quoted Isley and Singh (2005) and concluded that the relative expected grade is a significant and positive determinant of student evaluation of teaching. The relative expected grade is the difference between the expected grade in a course and the students overall grade point average (GPA).

Cleary (1996) cited in Mustafa and Chiang (2006) reported the learning environment supports and accelerates learning. Cleary also emphasized the teacher's role in helping students take responsibility for learning by offering students choices in what they will learn and how they will learn it and by helping students evaluate what they have learned. This approach supported

the use of the student evaluation as a measure of the amount of knowledge gained and, by extension, as an important indicator for improving and measuring the quality of education.

Previous research and studies in this field have defined, discussed, and/or empirically investigated the quality of higher education from various perspectives. Lomas (2004) in her paper mentioned Shank et al. (1995) examined service expectation from both students' and professors' perspectives. The study was conducted at three universities and covered 686 business students and 13 professors. The results showed that students' expectations of university services are greater than those of professors. There were three dimensions of education quality in the research: respect for students (i.e. professor's attitude), professor's knowledge (i.e. professor's abilities), and the physical environment of the university. The study was focused on the quality of higher education within the classroom, having said that the emphasis was on examining the course content and load rather than the physical environment. It was pointed out that higher education possessed all of the characteristics of a service: it is intangible, heterogeneous, and inseparable from the person delivering it. In this study, however, the course content is examined as a product that had distinct quality attributes that might interact with the quality-affecting attributes of the service provider (i.e. the teacher).

Gilbret and Evers (1989) cited by Lomas (2004) identified both "the determinants of the perceived amount of knowledge gained and the interrelationships among course content", "teacher performance and the quality of higher education" (Lomas, 2004, pp. 160). Lomas also mentioned that Brian (1995) focused on four essential qualities that distinguished exceptional teachers of high quality education institution: knowledge, communication skills, interest, and respect for students. He classified teacher qualities into two groups: "core qualities" that students recognize in good teachers, and a set of specific skills that are developed by good teachers.

Moreover, Lomas (2004) pointed out that many current term review system fostered poor quality in teaching. The overabundance of available research money encouraged teachers to pursue research and to focus on attracting research grants to their schools to obtain tenure, rather than to improve the quality of teaching by taking care of their students. It was reported that universities' emphasis on research placed a greater demand on lecturers' time and energy to the disadvantage of their students. He also criticized large classes which are not conducive to healthy interaction between students and faculty.

Telford and Masson (2005) argued that a better understanding of quality values was important because they have an impact on students' participation in the education process and students' satisfaction. From their work, they established a framework of possible quality values in higher education. Their survey result indicated the relative importance of involved parties to the quality values and an analysis of the congruence of quality values within the main parties and student satisfaction to show that there was no relationship between the congruence of quality values and student satisfaction.

Chua's (2004) research on parents, students, faculty members, and employers came to a single conclusion. All four understood the concept of quality with regard to higher education in different ways. For instance, parents view quality as ranking and reputation of the higher education provider while students saw quality in courses and teaching. Faculty members relates quality to the whole input and output of the education system. On the other hand, employer's perceived quality as skill set that students bring to workplace (Chua, 2004).

The delivery of service quality is an important goal for higher education provider in its objective to deliver perceived excellence. Perceived service quality is a known important influence on students' post-enrolment communication behavior. Besides, perceived service

quality acts as a principal strategic importance for the service provider. A university's perceived excellence provide guide for prospective students and scholars considering offers (Russell, 2005).

2.1.2.1 Service Quality in the Higher Education in Malaysia

The table below presents the service quality studies that have been conducted in Malaysia. From Table 2.1, there are few studies done in comparing the dimensions of service quality in the higher education. There is also lack of studies in Malaysia conducted using 5 dimensions of service quality as proposed in this study that consisted of learning environment (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003, Willborn & Cheng, 1994). This research indicates the importance of the topic of research as it is focused on the MBA program from School of Management, USM.

Firdaus (2005) proposed a new and more comprehensive performance-based measuring scale that attempt to capture the authentic determinants of service quality within higher education section called the Higher Education PERFormance-only (HEdPERF). The mentioned proposal recommended that the dimension access was the most important determinant of service quality in higher education. In other words, students perceived access to be more important than other dimensions in determining the quality of service they received. It was observed that access is the only HEdPERF dimension achieved significance. Access in the research was concerned with such elements as approachability, ease of contact and availability of both the academics and non-academics staff (Firdaus, 2005). In 2006, HEdPERF was again put to test against SERVPERF and the merged HEdPERF-SERVPERF. Findings of the research indicated that the "three measuring scales did not perform equivalently. HEdPERF method resulted in more reliable estimations, greater criterion and construct validity, greater explained variance, and consequently

better fit than the other two instruments namely SERVPERF and HEDPERF-SERVPERF” (Firdaus, 2005). In short, the findings demonstrated an apparent superiority of the modified five-factor structure of HEDPERF scale for higher education sector.

Table 2.1: Service Quality Studies in Malaysia

Author(s)	Study Sample(s)	Instrument/ Models	Value	Factor structure or other key finding(s)
Abdullah, Firdaus (2006)	Students of Public university, private university and private colleges in Malaysia	Higher Education PERFORMANCE (HEDPERF) & SERVPERF	This is believed to be the first study of its kind carried out among consumers of the higher education service.	A modified five-factor structure of HEDPERF is put forward as the most appropriate scale for the higher education sector.
Zailani, Suhaiza, Jauhar, Junaimah, Othman, Rosly, & Yen, Ng Lee (2006)	Students of 4 private colleges in Malacca, Malaysia.	The Perceived College Quality Scale & TQM	This study provided some insights of students perception towards the quality of service they received from private learning institutions.	The results have highlighted the needs to research, access, and improve the implementation of TQM in Malaysia private colleges.
Abdullah, Firdaus (2005)	Tertiary Institutions	HEDPERF	The development of HEDPERF: a new measuring instrument of service quality for higher education	The dimension access (approachability, ease of contact and availability of both the academics and non-academics staff) is the most important determinant of service quality in higher education.
Sohail, M. Sadiq, Rajadurai, Jegatheesan, & Abdul Rahman, Nor Azlin. (2003)	Pahang State College of Professional Development.	Case study on the management system prior to implementation of a quality system, development of the quality system, stages in its implementation and a review of the system.		The study proved the effectiveness of quality certification (ISO) in improving interdepartmental working relationship, student enrolment, staff and supplier satisfaction.

2.1.3 The Service Quality Models

For decades, various service quality models were established and practiced, covering the aspects of conventional services to the latest web interacted services. Up to this date, at least 19 service models are in use and applied to the current services context. Several of these models have

proved to be important measurement instrument in the service industry including the higher education industry. As the quality management of higher education was handled differently from that of manufacturing industries, popular service quality models practiced by business world have been adapted and applied through-out the years. For example, Total Quality Management (TQM) has been applied to schools and colleges in countries like UK, USA and Malaysia. And not forgetting the most popular SERVQUAL was also used to measure the quality in education (Chua, 2004).

It is a known fact that service quality is influenced by attitude and behavior of a service customer and provider. Different stakeholders are likely to prioritize different importance of these dimensions of quality according to their interest and motivations. There are a number of service quality measurement instruments available and can be applied to services. One instrument that can be applied to number of service setting, including higher education is called SERVQUAL (Ivancevich et. al., 1997).

The most common scale in the service quality model is SERVQUAL. It is based on the concept of a "service quality gap". A gap that exists between customers expected level of service and their perception of the actual level of service delivery (Jabnoun & Al-Saad, 2004). SERVQUAL's 5 dimensions include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Faganel and Macur (2005) in their research on the Faculty of Management Koper, used 5 dimensions of service quality to challenge the SERVQUAL theory. The research was to establish the most important determinants of quality perceived by students and professor of that particular faculty. Their research showed that students and professors understood quality differently. Students in the faculty perceived quality of education as a whole and not only to just a few quality items. On the other hand, their professors

recognized 5 quality dimensions (attention to students, regular and timely informing students, realization of planned services and students' suggestions, study materials and service performance in time) which differed from the concept of Parasuraman et al (Faganel & Macur, 2005).

In addition to that, there are several other models used in the higher education industry for service quality assessment. To name a few, the "Performance Only model (SERVPERF) introduced by Cronin and Taylor in 1992, the Evaluated Performance and Normed Quality model proposed by Teas in 1993, and the latest, the service quality scale (DL-sQUAL) of online distance learning programs introduced in 2006 by Shaik, Lowe and Pinegar" (Zhiltsov, 2006, pp 4-34). As quoted by Patkar and Holdford (2003, p. 3), Cronin and Taylor (1992)-advanced the use of the SERVPERF, based on perceptions of performance only. It results from examinations and assessments of the gap theory proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), and it relied on the construct that service quality is a form of consumer attitude. The SERVPERF is an enhanced means of measuring service quality.

DL-sQUAL was introduced as there was a need for an instrument to measure the quality of online education. Previous SERVQUAL and e-SQ models measured quality of traditional and eCommerce services and there are no instruments available to measure the quality of distance learning services. In their research, Shaik et al., (2006) found that the DL-eSQUAL scale demonstrated psychometric properties based on the validity and reliability analysis. Their findings from the exploratory research offered useful initial insights about the criteria and processes students use in evaluating distance learning services. These insights, in addition to serving as a starting point for developing a formal scale to measure perceived DL-sQUAL,